

Inspired by a gloomy township

Young businessman rises above hardship to provide Alexandra residents with a great service

Bongekile Skosana

THE Sandton skyline towers over the sprawling township of Alexandra and the contrast between rich and poor is huge.

For many Alex residents, the prospect of living in the shadow of giant glistening towers is daunting - but for one resident, Christopher Pienaar, it has provided great inspiration.

“The difficult and congested conditions in our township inspire me to do great things,” Pienaar told The New Age.

Pienaar was born 33 years ago in the exciting yet demoralising township. He was raised by his grandmother, also an entrepreneur; she sold vetkoek every morning when he was a teenager and he had the task of delivering them.

“As a teenager, I was introduced to the world of business and networking by my grandmother. Little did I know that her teachings would help me become a well-respected businessman in 11th Avenue,” he said.

The father of two established his company, Straight To Your Door, two years ago through the help of the Awethu project - which helps young entrepreneurs learn business skills.

“When I started the company, I had no business plan whatsoever - but through Awethu, I managed to start my business,” said a motivated Pienaar.

Straight to Your Door employs two people to deliver freshly baked bread to residents’ doors daily. One of the objectives of the company is to create employment for the youth in Alex and render a good service to the community. “My aim is to create jobs by employing 10 people to deliver the bread,” said Pienaar.

Although growing up in this community helped him find his feet, it was

not always smooth sailing. “Pride is a killer. At first my pride got in the way of me delivering bread in the community because I was disheartened by what people would think of me,” said a conquering Pienaar.

The township culture of gossip and looking down on anyone trying to achieve something, no matter how small, plays a destructive role in the lives of young people, and Chris has seen it all. A lot of young people in the community have no jobs and would rather spend their day sitting at street corners idling their lives away, he says.

“When I ask people to come work for me, their pride does not allow them and they would rather stay home,” said Pienaar.

Pienaar overcame his fear and pride of the township culture and corner talks by continuing to have a vision and striving towards it. “I saw that pride would not get me anywhere. Instead, I overcame it by reminding myself of my vision.

Every morning at 5:30, Pienaar hurries to deliver the fresh, warm bread that he buys at a discount from Pick’n Pay. His business continues to expand as his database has not only grown from two household to 280 daily, but he is now delivering goods for American company, Kraft foods.

“Earlier this year, I got a call from Kraft foods asking me to help them,” he said excitedly.

Now, Chris distributes Cadbury chocolates and sweets to other aspiring small business entrepreneurs, such as spaza shop owners and street hawkers in the township.

As an initiative to help other entrepreneurs, Kraft foods and Straight to Your Door identified 10 deserving spaza shops and hawkers and gave their shops



HOT BREAD FOR SALE: Chris Pienaar and Yusuf Randera-Rees on another successful mission.

makeovers.

The initiative was welcomed by its beneficiaries, who expressed gratitude to the soaring entrepreneur.

“Chris has helped us in more ways than one and we have a good working relationship with him,” said Grace Chauke, a hawker.

Pienaar is highly respected by the members of his community and through his achievements, remains to be an inspiration to young entrepreneurs in the neighbourhood.

Vusi Nyathikazi, 18, a spaza shop owner, said he enjoyed working with Pienaar “because he is a humble man”.

This is an attribute Pienaar encourages in young people, telling them to also be respectful and zealous to learn, so they may change their lives and be good role models for the next generation. “Being humble, respectful and channeling my thoughts into positivity helped to make it this far,” he said.

Entrepreneurs in training

THE Awethu Project has developed a globally acclaimed model for building businesses and creating sustainable jobs in under-resourced South African communities.

“Awethu trains and helps young entrepreneurs between the ages of 16 and 35 in these communities to start and grow businesses, selecting the most talented to be part of the high-impact Awethu Incubator,” said Yusuf Randera-Rees, the founder. The training has a three stages:

Stage one: Where someone comes to ask for help but has no idea what business they would like to establish.

Stage two: A person has an idea for starting a business but is finding difficulty in pursuing the idea.

Stage three: The business is working but the owner is finding it difficult to expand it.

Due to its innovative approach to economic development, Awethu was recently recognised as “one of the world’s most visionary social innovations of 2011” by Echoing Green, a leading benchmarker of social entrepreneurship organisations based in New York.

Awethu was one of 15 winners selected after a rigorous analysis of 2854 organisations from more than 100 countries. “Our intention is to replicate our model across Africa, creating a generation of excellent entrepreneurs from under-resourced backgrounds who can lead their continent to prosperity,” said Randera-Rees.

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Where there’s a will there’s also a way

Zibusisozethu Sithole

ANISA Kale has always wanted to be her own boss, make money on her own terms and help empower people at the same time.

When she combined her business ambition, her studies and experience in marketing and communication with her passion for township empowerment, it wasn’t long before Keys Communications was born. The company started operating in July 2009. It is an outdoor media and marketing agency, providing brands, products and services access to South African townships through mural advertising. It contributes to improving the image of city and township buildings as well as township upliftment.

The giant outdoor layouts, including building wraps, wall wraps, township house wall murals, boundary wraps, road posters, golf course advertising, truck branding and other outdoor advertising stands out and adds colour to sometimes drab surroundings.

Keys Communications is 100% black female owned and 98% black managed.

Through her company, Kale empowers township artists as well as township communities.

“Most of the houses are owned by our mothers or grandmothers who sometimes struggle to make ends meet so using their houses as advertising boards gives them the opportunity to make extra income,” said Kale.

Kale says starting her own company was not easy because although she had experience in the marketing industry, funding was one a great challenge.

“Financing is always a challenge, banks have a problem with service-rendering companies because there are no goods with a monetary value. I had to change my lifestyle and cut some things out to save up the money to start the business” she said.

What kept her going through the difficult early stages was the support she got from her family and her team.

“My mother was very supportive, she has never had a job but has always had some kind of business going, so she is also a businesswoman,” said Kale.

“Surrounding yourself with the right people is vital in building a successful business.

“No man is an island; you need to have people who know what’s going on. You need to have a mentor; not only in your direct line of business but also in other aspects of your business so that you have a holistic view of what is going



BROAD BRUSH STROKES: Anisa Kale, founder of Keys Communications, (inset) is passionate about township upliftment. Pictured are just two of her executions.

on.” Kale says having a complete and competent team sets her company apart from other marketing companies.

Having experts in different fields helps her to identify prime advertising spots for each of her clients and also gives her the ability to give informed presentations to her clients.

“Doing your homework is very important,” said Kale. She says knowing what you are doing and how to present your ideas is very essential in gaining the trust of not only your clients but also the people you work with.

Kale runs Keys Communications with her husband Kabelo Kale who is a communications strategist and not only plays a supportive role to his wife but also contributes his expertise to the business as a knowledgeable professional.

Although there is freedom in owning your own company, Kale says it is also difficult because her income is not stable and changes according to how well the business has performed in that month. Kale said there are months when her company does not perform as well as she hoped but she stays driven and motivated because of the support of the people around her and her husband who also understands the business.

Kale’s business is dependent on sourcing clients who want to advertise their product or service then finding the place to advertise. Kale says her team, which



includes a media and communications strategist work hard to find places where the advert will draw the attention of the target market of their client as well as convincing their client that their strategy is the best.

Her business pays home owners who own property selected for advertising. In this way Kale also gives back to the community.

Though she says her education in marketing and communications and her work experience in the field work to her advantage, young people should not be discouraged if they cannot go to

university. “You should at least try and get your matric and then make sure you are informed about the industry you want to get into. It isn’t easy for people in the township to get information but you should try, take that R10 and go to the internet café and read,” she said.

Kale says South African women have a better chance in business now that they ever had before and she encourages young women to consider going into business as a solution to unemployment because they will not only empower themselves but also empower others.

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Gelato makers inspire Italy’s young to stay

COSTIGLIOLE D’ASTI

TWO young entrepreneurs who started an award-winning international ice-cream (gelato) business from scratch are urging talented Italians not to abandon their recession-hit country.

Friends Guido Martinetti and Federico Grom started their Grom ice-cream company in 2003, when the pair, in their twenties and with little capital, set out to revolutionise Italian gelato despite knowing nothing about it.

Inspired by the eco-friendly Slow Food movement, the ice-cream was a hit and there are now 58 Grom parlours across France, Italy, Japan and the United States, with booming profits despite the crisis.

“Neither of us knew how to make ice-cream, that was the first problem. Worse than that, we didn’t have any money,” joked Federico Grom, 39. He said their initial business plan was “not very sound at all”.

But Martinetti - inspired to act by Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini’s comments that it was no longer possible to find “ice-cream made with excellent ingredients” - refused to give up on his plan to plug the gap in the market.

He took out a loan of \$40 000 and, with Grom’s savings, they opened their first shop in Turin, the Italian city that is home to the Slow Food movement, which strives to boost local cuisine and respect the environment.

The pair say that despite a sense of resignation and frustration among Italy’s young, who have been hit hard by the economic crisis and recession

that followed, the answer is not to flee the country but to become innovators.

According to Confindustria business association, around 120 000 Italian youth went abroad in 2008 and 2009; 70% of them graduates.

The country’s young must disregard “the myth that everything is easier abroad” and instead seek out the “great opportunities” at home, the pair say.

Martinetti and Grom, committed at first to recreating the traditional nut and chocolate gelatos of the region with pre-industrial methods, began sourcing ingredients such as coffee beans and pistachios from small farmers globally.

Determined to use only fresh seasonal fruit, they bought a 15 hectare (37 acre) farm in the Piedmont region in 2007. They named it Mura Mura, which means “slowly” in Madagascar, as homage to the Slow Food philosophy.

From dark chocolate to pistachio or liquorice, their ice-creams are made with organic eggs and cocoa and coffee from central America, while fig, mandarin and apple-flavoured sorbets are made with Italian mineral water.

The mixtures are shipped frozen to Grom parlours abroad from the farm and factory outside Turin, and are then churned on location.

Grom’s turnover has jumped from 250 000 euros in 2003 to 30 million euros today, and the company has sold 5% to Italian coffee maker Illy and another 5% to a partner in Japan.

Martinetti and Grom say they hope their success can inspire some of Italy’s 36% unemployed 15 to 24 year olds to have faith in themselves. - AFP



CREAMING IT: Grom founders Federico Grom and Guido Martinetti at their farm in Costigliole d’Asti.

Picture: AFP PHOTO